

15 December 1963

TO : Mike Dunn S/A
FROM : Earl Young RA
SUBJECT: Preliminary Survey-Long An Province.

The first phase in the Long An Task Force concept is a hamlet-by-hamlet survey in the area destined for a clear and hold operation. The general attitude and responses of the hamlet residents has been a matter of some conjecture since it is the key factor in the rescue operation. Therefore, Mr. Everett Bungardner, Chief of USIS Field Operations in Viet-Nam attempted a sample survey on 13 and 14 December. Based on past experience a technique was employed which has proven reasonably accurate in other provinces. This method involves interviewing secondary school students while they are in attendance at school. The advantages of this technique are several; since usually there are only a few students from each hamlet that are financially able to attend a secondary school, the number of hamlets represented by a large number of students is equally large; secondly, the students speak more freely away from the hamlet than under the eye of the Viet Cong agents. The disadvantages are also many. For example, out of a total population of 382,000 people interviews with only two or three hundred students is a very small percentage. The replies of students may be influenced by factors not influential in the replies of adults. However, this preliminary survey did produce some interesting answers which should be brought to your attention.

At the Tan An secondary school a total of 200 students representing about 20 to 30 hamlets were interviewed. The initial group consisted of 15 students, boys and girls from 14 to 18 years of age. These students were told by Mr. Bungardner (who speaks Vietnamese) about his work with USIS and that he simply wanted to get their ideas and thoughts on the hamlet program. He distributed a copy of a USIS-published pictorial magazine to gain their cooperation. As the discussion, conducted outdoors near a large shade tree, grew in intensity, more and more students arrived, to listen, participate, and then be replaced with others.

The results of this interview/discussion session at the Tan An school produced the following results:

- a. The students considered themselves (and their families ?) to be merely bystanders in the Viet Cong-Government war. They have one thought upper-most in mind: safety and self-preservation. If fighting must be done, it should be conducted "out there", away from their homes. These students, speaking in what would legally be a seditious manner under Vietnamese law, said quite frankly that they didn't care who won, and were agreeable to either a Viet Cong or democratic government, if only the fighting would stop. (While this may indicate a great political naivete, the attitude is certainly clear.)

b. The majority of these students were from families that had been relocated into strategic hamlets. After security, the second most frequently expressed desire was to be allowed to leave the hamlets and return to their old home areas. The complaints against the hamlets were that the new houses were much smaller than their old homes; they had to live too close to one another; the farming area was less or they had to walk too far to their old land; they had not received the money promised them for relocating.

These same students stated that if they were permitted to leave, and then larger houses were built in the hamlets, more room given to each family, and regular ARVN units were stationed outside the hamlets, they would then perhaps move back inside. In short, if everything was done to improve the hamlet without requiring any effort from them, they might return.

c. ARVN units and individuals have their respect. The students said the VC laugh at the Civil Guard and SDC, but are afraid of ARVN. Also that if an ARVN soldier behaves improperly, his officers punish him.

d. The complaints against the SDC ranked third in number of priority, but were expressed with vigor. SDC recruit from the local area were said to behave much better than those brought in from outside the village. Chief complaints were that the SDC mistreated them, took their chickens without paying or for a token payment, and would not go out and fight. Upon closer questioning, the students claimed to have seen these actions themselves, not heard of them from others.

At the second school on the following morning another interview was held. This school is located in Can Due District, reputed to be the worst in the province. Three students from this school had been arrested by the former government, one caught with a hand grenade, the other two with Viet Cong leaflets. About 100 students were interviewed here, a teacher nearby served initially to restrict their replies by his presence, but they soon warmed up to the discussion. These students were generally not from relocated families. About 20 hamlets were represented. Replies from this group were very similar to those of the Tan An school, reflecting in particular the desire to live in peace and the dislike of the SDC.

For Special Consideration

Both groups expressed a general dislike of the former Diem government, but this dislike was directed towards its local representatives and agents: the police, hamlet construction cadre and SDC, not towards the person of the former President. They had, in fact, very little contact with the national government, and the little they did have turned them against it.

To gain further insight to their political attitudes, Mr. Bumgardner posed the following question: "I have been on many battlefields where I have seen Viet Cong lying dead, with weapons in their hands. They were obviously soldiers. Where did they come from?" The expected answer was

to claim they were from "up north" for this is the reply usually given. However, without a moments hesitation, the students pointed to themselves and said "from us". Feeling somewhat surprised at this frank reply Mr. Bumgardner asked why. Because, the students replied, the Viet Cong have promised us many things when they win. They explained to us that we would have to go into the army, either for them or for the government. If we join the Viet Cong, we can stay in this area, and see our families. If we go with the government, then they will send us far away. So we will join the Viet Cong.

On the subject of hamlet militia, the students were very unhappy about having to serve and especially carry weapons. They said if they were armed, the VC were angry; but if they let the government catch them without the weapons, then the government was angry. So the best thing was to hide them.

With reference to the new revolutionary government, the impression was favorable. Students volunteered the information that many of the generals were from the South. (Actual figure, 14 of 16.) They expressed a willingness to give the new government a chance, and judge it on its willingness to perform with actions, not words.

The whole situation might be summed up in the unsolicited query from one student:

"We see and talk to the Viet Cong all the time. Why doesn't the government ever come to our hamlet and speak to us?"

There are twenty-one secondary schools in Long An Province. It appears that we have failed completely to explain either the faults of a Communist system or the benefits of freedom to these students. Why?